Technology and urban space: on the relation between the historical approach and the transformation of aesthetic values in Walter Benjamin

Nélio Conceição

Introduction

The aim of this text is to bring to light some features of Walter Benjamin's philosophy that could contribute to a discussion on aesthetic values. This contribution can be regarded from a direct and an indirect point of view: direct in relation to the texts where he explicitly tackles the concept of *value*; indirect in relation to the historical and critical background of his thought, which forms a constant *evaluation* of the transformations occurring in the conditions of human experience in modernity. These two elements often interweave. For instance, in the well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility", the historical perspective – the understanding of the changes in our relation to aesthetic phenomena resulting from the increasing reproducibility of works of art – is grounded on the distinction between cult value and exhibition value. We can also say that the second element, the historical and critical task of Benjamin's thought, is scattered throughout his entire work. I will focus my attention on two themes that involve this interweaving of aesthetic values and historical thinking, technology and urban space. By doing this, I have no intention of being exhaustive, but I am just bringing up fundamental features and interrogations in order to prepare further developments in regard to aesthetic values and their relationship to artistic, political and ethical questions.

1. History, art and technology

Prolonging the critical approach on modernity inherited from Nietzsche, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, and confronting this approach with aspects deriving from Messianism, German Romanticism, Marxism or *avant-garde* artistic practices, Benjamin's texts thoroughly evaluate the transformations, often contradictory, that occur in modern capitalist societies. The weakening of tradition as a condition for the formation of human experience (*Erfahrung*) and its substitution by new forms of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is a central thread of this evaluation. This pair of concepts is fundamental in the texts written on Baudelaire, in "The Storyteller", in "Experience and Poverty" and, explicitly and implicitly, in the majority of his texts that combine critique of art and social and political analysis. They perfectly illustrate the distinctive working of Benjamin's dialectics by combining destructive and constructive elements, thus maintaining a historical tension between that what is lost and that what is gained in the periods of transformation.

Benjamin is one of the first authors to have studied the implications of the new technologies of recording/reproduction, such as photography and cinema, for the understanding of the artistic transformations in modernity. Nevertheless, his insightful remarks do not constitute a philosophy of technology with clear-cut principles; on the contrary, they are disseminated in a manifold of texts, often as remarks focusing on concrete objects and particular historical situations. If we understand the aesthetic values as axes around which the production and critique of aesthetic phenomena circulate, giving them meaning and feeding their practices, we can therefore investigate the role technology has had in the transformation and creation of artistic values. It is in this sense that Benjamin's thought reveals all its relevance. But defending its actuality in a straightforward way is perhaps less important than clarifying its complexity and making the effort to understand why today, while reading his texts, we can still have a sense of contemporaneity and why his concepts still prove to be fertile – the more we are able to detour them in order to answer the demands of our present time, the more fertile they are.

In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", published in 1940, Benjamin states that Baudelaire was the first poet to embrace the experience of shock as a core element of his artistic work.[1] This embracement was not merely an individual stance; on the contrary, it corresponded to the experience of his readers, a trait that justifies the successful reception of his work at the time. More forcefully than ever, lyric poetry was integrating social elements directly related to the transformations occurring in urban societies, with the shock effect being the most important of them all. The shock effect is closely tied to the perceptual, bodily and mnemonic transformations taking place in urban life, characterized by immersion in the crowd and the new sensory stimuli arriving from different objects and situations, often related to the new technologies and an increasingly mechanized world.[2] Also photography, states Benjamin, while fixating an event for an undetermined period of time, achieves it by imposing a shock on the event, freezing it and giving it a posthumous character. This idea is developed in the context of the analysis of the small-scale gestures unfolding a complex process which involves haptic and optical experiences. The perception conditioned by shock, on the other hand, is for Benjamin a formal principle of cinema:

> Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [*chockförmige Wahrnehmung*] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film[3].

1 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 319.

2 In his interpretation of the urban element in Benjamin's writings, Graeme Gilloch sums up this idea as follows: "The hallmark of modern experience is 'shock'. This in turn engenders forgetfulness and a distinctive form of memory, the *mémoire involontaire*. In addition, the accelerated tempo and new, machine-based rhythms of metropolitan life lead to a distinctively modern temporal sensibility rooted in the commodification of time (equation of time and money) and repetition (fetishism and fashion)". Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, p. 8.

3 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p. 328.

This line of thought, affirming the worthlessness of approaching the experience of shock from a strict negative perspective and suggesting that the best attitude is to find a way of adapting to it, turning it into something productive, giving it a social and political task, runs through many of Benjamin's texts. For instance, in the various versions of the "Work of art" essay, the shock experience encompasses not only film and photography, but also Dadaism, a movement which destroys the traditional forms of relating to painting, such as contemplative immersion (*contemplative Versenkung*).[4] It is also the persistence of tradition that is questioned in the destructive gesture of the Dadaists, particularly in regard to the transmission of former experiences with art and, if we want to add, of enduring aesthetic values.

The experience of shock is thus a transversal notion running through the strictly poetic elements (both in the sense of production and reception), the new technologies and also the sensorial and psychological factors. Psychoanalysis and the question of trauma, memory and remembrance are also part of Benjamin's reflection on remembrance, and they can be read alongside the texts where he combines the experience of the city with the experience of his own childhood, as in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*.

The issue of technology is also a gateway to Benjamin's particular historical materialism. The text "Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian" develops one of the most detailed presentations of the task he ascribes to the historical materialist. Though focusing on the nineteenth century, some of his remarks also clarify his perspective regarding technology. These remarks emerge in the context of his critique to "the bungled reception of technology"[5], a process sustained by a series of enthusiastic efforts incapable of confronting the fact that technology is intrinsically attached to the production of commodities, therefore serving the principles of capitalism. "Technology, however, is obviously not a purely scientific development. It is at the same time a historical one."[6] According

4 For the third version, see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, p. 266.

5 Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 266.

6 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

to Benjamin, the historical constitution of technology should drive us to question the positivistic and undialectical separation between natural sciences and humanities. It should force us to examine its destructive elements and by the same token rescue it from the narratives based on the sheer idea of progress. This means: opening up the possibility of blasting the historical continuum by pinpointing the destructive character of its energies – when adopted, for instance, by war and propaganda.

In what follows, Benjamin adds some critical remarks to the history of culture conceived as a discipline. His critique focuses on the attempt to see historical materialism as a history of culture, grounded on the possibility of presenting its content from a non-binding distance, by throwing them into relief. This model is based on illusion and false consciousness. It neglects not only the fact that there is no such thing as a dialectical historical approach without a dialectic between the present and the past, but also the fact that "the products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of the great geniuses who created them, but also, in one degree or another, to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. No cultural history has yet done justice to this fundamental state of affairs, and it can hardly hope to do so."[7] This means that the task of the historian is also to give voice to the anonymous of society, those forgotten ones who are the invisible counterpart of humanity's great cultural achievements.[8]

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7 *Idem*, p. 267. In *Das Passagen-Werk*, the relation between barbarism and culture is mentioned again, in this case with a reference to the way it manifests in the survival of values: "Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture – as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive. In this way they serve the apotheosis of the latter <word uncertain>, barbaric as it may be." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London, The Belknap Press of University Press, 1999, [N5a,7], pp. 467–468.

8 We can also say that while examining the city Benjamin pays attention to peripheral figures like the prostitute or the rag-picker. Alongside "marginal" figures belonging to the bourgeoisie, like the *flâneur* or the collector, they are part of the micrological analysis of modernity which reveal the contradictions of progress and the phantasmagorical character of the narratives, often mythological, sustaining the capitalist world. By giving them voice, he is putting in motion his own critical thinking and allowing for a different, often detoured, manner of understanding historical time.

Without disregarding the weaknesses of Eduard Fuchs' ideas, Benjamin nevertheless recognizes that he was capable of disrupting the principles of history of culture, coming closer to the dialectical task. Driven by his character of collector, he stepped into fields on the edge where the traditional concepts of art could only fail. "The order of values which determined the consideration of art for Goethe and Winckelmann has lost all influence in the work of Fuchs"[9]. It is in this context that Benjamin refers to the three main dialectic elements in Fuchs' oeuvre: the interpretation of iconography, the contemplation of mass art, the examination of the techniques of reproduction. These three motifs have in common the fact that "they refer to forms of knowledge which could only prove destructive to traditional conceptions of art"[10]. They accentuate the importance of reception in art and, within certain limits, also contribute to correct the process of reification occurring in a work of art, obliging a revision of the concept of genius and to prevent the excesses of formalism.

We can transpose these remarks, which directly articulate the changes in aesthetic values with technology and mass art, to the critique and the history of reception of other objects, whether from literature, cinema, photography or, more recently, digital art. They are part of the historical materialist approach and therefore they are apt to reveal new tasks and new social and political functions in art. It is important to mention that the ideas raised by Benjamin regarding the relation between art and technology should not be reduced to the question of reproduction/reproducibility, a question that was already examined by Eduard Fuchs and that guides one of Benjamin's most well-known and discussed essays. The connection between art, technology and history is all the more fertile when it encompasses a model of thought capable of weighing the processes of transformation, the destructive and constructive elements of culture, the dialectical relation between the What-has-been (*Gewesen*) and the Now (*Jetzt*) that forms the constellations showing new possibilities of reading.[11] And such notions as optical unconscious and innervation, which belong to a wider understanding of

9 Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", p. 269.

10 *Idem*, *ibidem*.

11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N3, 1], p. 463.

the relation between perception, human body and technology, prove not only the complexity of his ideas, but also the capacity of his thought to envisage a productive task in the midst of the historical tensions.

2. Cult value and exhibition value

The "Work of Art" essay focuses on the manifold consequences originated by the mechanical reproduction of works of art. It analyses its impact on artistic processes, on the function of art and on its relation to society and politics; at the same time, it reflects upon the existence of forms of art such as photography and cinema which can reach the masses in an unprecedented manner. One important idea behind the essay is the transition from a historical period in art defined by the cult value to a period defined by the exhibition value of works of art. Cult value is based on authenticity and uniqueness. These are attached to the notion of the original, to the here and now of the original. By liberating the hand and allowing infinite and fast multiplications, mechanical reproduction dissolves the importance previously ascribed to the original and weakens its authority.

> The reason is twofold. First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction. For example, in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether. This is the first reason. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record.[12]

In order to characterize this loss of authenticity, Benjamin uses the term aura, previously introduced in his "Little History of Photography", and

12 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (third version), p. 254.

links it to a general process concerning important changes in the value of tradition engendered by photography and film.[13] He then recalls the fact that the earliest works of art were at the service of cult and rituals – first magic, then religious. In this regard, even the secular worship of beauty which started in the Renaissance and lasted three centuries is said to have a cult character. "With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase"[14]. This liberation accentuating the exhibition value, exponentially increased by mechanical reproduction, allows works of art to acquire different functions, especially political.

Cult value is thus correlated with aura; consequently, with the vanishing of the cultic function the aura of works of art tends to disappear. We can of course put this idea into question by asking if our contemporary experiences with art are completely freed from these "tissues of space and time" that maintain an unapproachability. Didi-Huberman, for instance, challenging the canonical readings, brings the notion of aura and its constitutive distance to a secular context in art in order to understand the minimalist movement.[15] In the case of photography – and it is not by chance that the decay of aura is associated with the pioneering work of Atget, for whom the human figure lost its privilege – the cult value resides quite obviously in the human face, particularly in the cult of remembrance which is so characteristic of the familial milieu.

13 The aura is firstly defined according to spatiotemporal categories: "the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (*Idem*, p. 255). In a note, Benjamin explains that this distance is also the property of cult value: "The *essentially* distant is the unapproachable. Unapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image" (*Idem*, p. 272). This is not the place to go deeper into the characterization of the aura (also in other texts) nor to question the reach of Benjamin's proposal, but it is nevertheless important to add that the usage of the term aura is far from knowing a stable meaning in his texts; instead, it seems to lead to a complex network of problems regarding human perception, our experience with objects and the mutable understanding of works of art.

14 *Idem*, p. 257.

15 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1992, pp. 103–123.

3. Notes on urban issues

The question of aesthetic values in Benjamin, as in several of his contemporaries who analysed the new technical means like photography and cinema, is closely tied to the study of mediated perception and the consequences resulting from changes in the conditions of perception. As mentioned before, the experience of shock, increased by the urban modern life, comprises an obvious perceptual dimension, often related to bodily-rooted reactions to technological stimuli. Used as a principle for understanding cinema, as Benjamin sometimes suggests, it might lead to an excessively narrow approach, but regarded as a conflation of key elements accounting for the changes of human experience in modern societies, it can still prove its fecundity.

In *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, published in 1925, Moholy-Nagy, while commenting upon the new perspectives allowed by photography, and particularly upon a photograph where the distortion of the human figure is an appeal to experiment with different ways of looking at the picture (and at reality), talks about an "invitation to re-evaluate our way of seeing [*Aufforderung zur Umwertung des Sehens*]. This picture can be turned round. It always produces new vistas".[16] In fact, in this re-valuation (or transvaluation, to recall Nietzsche's motto of the "transvaluation of all values") we can detect a bond between perception and value, nourished by technology. Seeing differently as a possibility of revaluating phenomena is a sort of perspectivism, naturally not a rigorous Nietzschean one, but one that nevertheless breaks the fixed and longstanding images of the world and accentuates the multiplicity of points of view.[17] In this sense, it is also noteworthy that many of the avant-garde artists who explored photography and film as technologies

16 Lázsló Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1987, p. 61.

17 Is this just a metaphor? Is there any connection between the changes in perception mobilized by the new techniques of reproduction and the questioning of true and one-sided objectivities operated conceptually in the philosophical realm? We can perhaps talk about a simultaneous process here, a process of fragmentation which also occurred in other fields of knowledge: in science, in literature, in art.

capable of creating a new vision of the world, such as the circle around Bauhaus, Rodchenko or Dziga Vertov, did it by constantly addressing the urban landscape, exploring perspectives and rhythms, recreating reality by means of montage.[18] In the case of Moholy-Nagy, there is a clear relationship between the changes in the visual realm and social change, and throughout his practice, his teaching and his writings, we can discern a utopian element dealing with the complex political situation of the time.[19]

According to Benjamin, seeing differently has also a destructive element. In the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, the one discussed with Adorno and Horkheimer, the one that served as a basis for the French translation, Benjamin introduces the element of play as a counterpart to the decay of cult value. Play belongs to the cultural context of what Benjamin calls the second technology and is closely tied to the notion of experimentation. The distinction between first and second technology unfolds, respectively, the distinction between cult and exhibition value. The passage from the first to the second technology implicates the decreasing of beautiful semblance (of the "object *in* its veil" – in this second version, an equivalent to aura). "That what is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in the works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [*Spiel-raum*]"[20]. According to this analysis, which is also a utopian projection on the future of art, cinema is in a privileged situation. Before describing the characteristics of the optical unconscious, as well as its technical components – close-up, slow motion or enlargement – Benjamin makes use of the dialectic ideas of destruction and *Spielraum*:

> On the one hand, [cinema] furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*].

18 The last chapter of *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* is exactly the presentation of a project entitled "Dynamic of the Metropolis", dating from 1921–22, a purely visual experiment with filmed events in space and time. *Idem*, pp. 122–137.

19 See Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

20 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (second version), n. 22, p. 127.

> Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.[21]

Not only does this section describe a "revaluation of seeing", but it also adds that this description can promote the destruction of the images encapsulating our cities. The process of destruction leads to the creation of a free scope, which is however not an absolute emptiness but a utopian social space characteristic of the second technology. In order to become revolutionary, the goals of this space should be sustained by a collective innervation.[22]

Benjamin soon understood the pertinence of the connection between photography, cinema and the city. Without belonging to any avant-garde movement, Atget is nevertheless a good example of this connection and of the capacity of photography to clear the stereotyped atmosphere of urban space, in this case, of Paris. Nowadays, the *Spielraum* is necessarily different. In fact, more than to the creation of utopias, many photographers, film and video makers dedicate themselves to the study of architectonic and urban utopias set in motion a long time ago. In the work of Portuguese artists such as Paulo Catrica or Nuno Cera, photography and film (video) are used in order to deepen this study. They can be said to evaluate either the post-war utopias, or the complex tissues of modern cities, their peripheral areas and contradictions. And in both cases the evaluation is less concerned with final judgements and more with the issue of visibility, of presenting cities in a rigorous but manifold way, thereby allowing comparisons. This is perhaps the best method of dealing with the complexity of contemporary urban life.

Walter Benjamin's thought about the city encompasses several interests and approaches: 1) urban "pen-pictures", such as his descriptions

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21 *Idem*, *ibidem*, p. 117.

22 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (second version)", p. 124. For a reading of the relation between technology and architecture in the context of this version of the essay, see Diane Morgan, "*Spielraum* et *Greifbarkeit*: un acheminement vers une architecture utopique", in Libero Andreotti, *Spielraum: W. Benjamin et L'architecture*, pp. 291–301.

of Naples and Moscow; 2) descriptions and analysis of the urban setting in the *Passagenarbeit* (the Paris writings); 3) autobiographical texts: "Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood around 1900"; 4) radio broadcasts; 5) reviews of books dealing with the city (e.g. Franz Hessel's *On Foot in Berlin*).[23] If we agree on the constellational nature of the knowledge of the city enabled by his texts[24], we can find interesting parallels with the functioning of technological apparatus. In this sense, Graeme Gilloch argues that

> the shifting vantage-point of the film camera is also important. Benjamin's concern with the depiction of the urban is interwoven with a conscious refusal of or resistance to the presentation of an overarching, integrated, coherent view of the city as a whole. The imagistic approach highlights the fleeting, fluid character of modern metropolitan existence. It denies a systematic, stable perspective.[25]

Hence, besides the idea of constellation, technology increased an element which is fundamental in Benjamin's relationship with the city: physiognomy and, implicitly, the idea of decipherment. The city as a monad can be conceived as an "entity that encapsulates the characteristic features of modern social and economic structures, and is thus the site for their most precise and unambiguous interpretation."[26] Therefore, not only is it important to see differently, but also to be able to decipher.

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23 Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*, pp. 1–20.

24 While trying to circumscribe Walter Benjamin's pertinence to urban studies, Michael Keith focuses not only upon some of his constellatory thematics, but also upon the analytical and political value these thematics still have today. They run as follows: the culture of money and the cultural production of economic value; problematizing the real and the production of space and time; the city as text and emblem; aura, distance and closeness and the problem of the city view; authenticity and urbanism as corporeal experience. Michael Keith, "Walter Benjamin, Urban Studies and the Narrative of Everyday Life", in *A Companion to the City*, (ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson), Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 410–429.

25 Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City*, p. 18.

26 *Idem*, pp. 5–6. On this topic, see also Willi Bolle, *Fisiognomia da Metrópole Moderna. Representação da História em Walter Benjamin*, São Paulo, Edusp, 1994.

Final remarks

The ideas outlined allow us to consider the city – understood as a research field ranging from philosophy to the arts – as a privileged space where the values of the present are discernible, where the historical tensions with the past can be measured, where we can project the expectations and challenges of the future. Nowadays, the way we live and experience urban space is certainly different from the nineteenth century way brought forth by the quotations and observations of *Das Passagen-Werk*. It is necessarily different from the political and cultural context of the Weimar Republic and the years that culminated in the Second World War. Nonetheless, the purpose of this text is to stress the fact that the complexity of Benjamin's historical thought, the interweaving of political, technological or aesthetical questions, may provide us with "methods", concepts and insights that prove to be contemporary. Ethical and political questions arise constantly while reading his texts. Though in a detoured and disguised manner, we are heirs of his evaluation of modernity, of the difficult relation to tradition, of the ever-increasing blind discourse on technological progress, often unacquainted with the destructive counterpart of the new. What is interesting in Benjamin, as in contemporaries such as Moholy-Nagy or Kracauer, is not a plain belief in technological progress and modern urban life, but the ability to simultaneously understand the destructive and constructive elements of the transformations they encompass, which confront us with axiological questions.

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